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## Mentions légales

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## *(Im)politic Jesting: Lear's Fool—and Henri III's*

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“My poor fool” (Shakespeare, *Lr.*, V.iii.304) indeed. It is not enough that he ends up conflated with Cordelia, left hanging in at least the metaphorical sense, and perhaps the literal one too, as a textual loose end. Another of the prices that the Fool in *King Lear* has had to pay for being in the wrong place (or play) at the wrong (or right) time is posterity's projection upon him of various forms of exalted literary and anthropological status. At least since the fading from living memory of the concrete reality—or realities—on which the character is ultimately based, those projections have been inflected by successive waves of post-romantic sensibility. The effect persists even within our resolutely post-structuralist, historicist and materialist perspective, if only in the fact that we habitually search for something like the character's essence in the literally oxymoronic convention of the wise-fool.

This is fair enough in terms of literary pedigree: how could we not relate the Fool in *King Lear* to Touchstone and Feste, placing him within the line of evolution from the cruder clowns that Shakespeare adapted for Will Kemp to those more complex figures that he developed to match the bitter-sweet specialty of Robert Armin? Moreover, the intrinsic metaphysical appeal of the aporia (wise folly, foolish wisdom) remains a

stubborn overlay on our perception, and that, ultimately, with the authority of Erasmus. So does a residual tendency to sentimentalise the relation between Lear and the Fool (plus Cordelia?), which is commonly encouraged in productions and becomes nearly irresistible in the storm scenes. Even there, however, it seems important to note that, whereas Lear certainly comes to express pity for the Fool (“Poor fool and knave, I have one part in my heart / That’s sorry yet for thee” [III.ii.72-73]) as part of his new gift for empathy, which relays Gloucester’s and Kent’s abundant compassion for himself, the Fool, in what he actually says, on the heath or off it, never blunts his bitter edge to the extent of feeling sorry for anyone, including himself.

These interpretative traps that we fall into hinder, I think, a clear sight of the uniqueness of the Fool in *King Lear*, not only as a conspicuous intrusion into the tragedy, without precedent in the sources, but as a commentator on its politics, which here, of course, are inextricable from Lear’s family politics, especially on the crucial point of authority. Touchstone and Feste are shrewd and witty exposers of pretences of all kinds, “corrupter[s] of words” (Shakespeare, *TN*, III.i.36) in the latter’s phrase, but neither is specifically tied to a major actor on the political stage, and neither casts more than a passing and distant glance at the politics of his play, which, however cushioned by comic structure, have their own claims to be considered starkly. By contrast, Lear’s Fool is incisively and aggressively political from his very first words, which explain why the disguised Kent deserves to wear his coxcomb: “Why? For taking one’s part that’s out of favour. Nay, an thou canst not smile as the wind sits, thou’ld catch cold shortly” (I.iv.98-100). He is hostile at the first thought of Goneril (evoked as “Lady Brach” who “may stand by the fire and stink” [I.iv.110-11]), then confrontational at the first sight of her, flaunting his “all-licensed” (I.iv.191) credentials in the guise of stifling them: “Yes, forsooth, I will hold my tongue; so your face bids me, though you say nothing” (I.iv.185-86).

The political keynote is sustained. Across the general “reality checks” that he provides, both mental (“Cry you mercy, I took you for a joint-stool” [III.vi.51]) and elemental (“’tis a naughty night to swim in” [III.iv.109-10]), his preoccupations counterpoint Lear’s, which are, naturally enough, with the abuses of power, hypocrisy and multiple moral corruption native to the human condition but flagrant in the courtly one. It goes against this textual grain to impose a staging to match John Bayley’s downbeat deflating of him: “Made to play his part upon the stage of the court, the Fool shrivels into a wretched little human being

on the soaking heath” (p. 61). After all, he is sodden enough when the Folio text pointedly enrols him in the register of foolish political commentators by way of the prophecy of “confusion” for “Albion” that “Merlin shall make” (III.iii.91, 90, 95). Perhaps, on the contrary, a case can be made for an interventionist, activist fool, who belongs squarely where Goneril places him—amongst the hundred knights, the “other of your insolent retinue” (I.iv.192).

Making such a case would be easier, however, if there were a cultural model in clear view, and it is this paper’s business to propose one—a model, I hasten to add, not a source. Despite my long-standing promotion of the idea that the English of the period, notably including Shakespeare, were in the habit of looking and reading across the Channel, I would not insist that the example of Chicot, alias Antoine Anglarez, the Gascon court fool of Henri III (and later of Henri IV), had a higher claim on the playwright’s imagination than local material may have had. It is just that the traces of such material are frustratingly elusive and fragmentary. For what it is worth, it seems evident that Samuel Rowley had roughly the same sort of *engagé* jester in mind when, in the nearly contemporaneous *When You See Me You Know Me*, he has Will Sommers twitting Cardinal Wolsey. As to more concrete models, there would have been to some degree, for Shakespeare in 1605-6 when he was composing *King Lear*, the instance of Archie Armstrong, the current king’s official jester. Indeed, R. A. Foakes, the latest Arden editor, noting that “Archie was noted for an impudence verging on arrogance, but retained considerable influence throughout the reign of James and on into that of Charles I”, supposes that caution was in order lest the parallel become too apparent (p. 51). (A more dangerous one, after all, might thereby be dragged into play.) Hence, as Foakes believes, the play’s insistence on the Fool’s medieval costume, in contrast with the one in which Archie figures in one of his jest books, which makes him look “more like a courtier than a traditional fool” (Foakes, pp. 51-52).<sup>1</sup>

Yet parallels are as parallels do, and are surely not to be overridden by costume effects. The full history of Archie has yet to be written, if it ever can be, but the “considerable influence” to which Foakes cryptically alludes points up the fact that, in ways that the jest books themselves would not necessarily suggest, he was indeed a courtier, as well as a Fool. John Taylor, the so-called Water Poet, published in the 1630 collection of his works a serio-comic versified account

1 For the illustration, see Foakes, p. 53.

of Archie (also cryptic, unfortunately) as a broker of peace between England and France. The point of departure is a pseudo-prophecy of Archie's destiny couched in the Merlin tradition. And there is at least a shred of evidence that Archie could be a "bitter fool" indeed: the gossipy recollections of the courtier Francis Osborne, published in the mid-seventeenth century, contain the claim that Archie drew tears (and literally poisonous thoughts) from James by taunting him about the greater popularity of his son Henry (Osborne, p. 531). No date is provided (the Prince's death on 6 November 1613 furnishes a particularly resounding *terminus ad quem*), but we are firmly in the same mixed realm of contested political and paternal authority occupied by Lear and his Fool.

My point is that Archie is part of a poorly grasped tradition of political commentators, and even actors on the political stage, amongst professional court fools, and it happens that the case of Chicot has come down to us more fully documented. The documentation remains scattered and of uneven quality, but it is strictly contemporary, remarkably diverse and generally coherent. It is therefore possible to define with some precision the discursive coordinates of the personage, as well as to deduce the extent of his notoriety. A number of pamphlets and letters survive, in print or in manuscript, either authored by or facetiously attributed to him. He is named in official documents and correspondence and mentioned by, amongst others, the memorialist Brantôme, the historian (and poet) Agrippa d'Aubigné, and, in especially helpful ways (as often), by that indefatigable chronicler of his time, Pierre de l'Estoile.

For better or worse, Chicot is most fully and vividly present in the French cultural imagination in the form of the character drawn by Alexandre Dumas in *La dame de Montsoreau*, a novel whose main business is sensationally to recreate the sensational enough history of Bussy d'Amboise. The problem is not just that the writer of fiction did his job very well indeed, but that his fiction has influenced the only historian, to my knowledge, to have made a thorough investigation and interpretation of the sources, some of which are very hard to come by. (I have certainly not tracked down the manuscripts myself.) The 1914 *Histoire de Chicot, Bouffon de Henri III*, by Jules Mathorez, is a serious, if concise, assessment, but it remains very much under the spell of Dumas. "[N]otre romancier national" (Mathorez, p. 37), we are assured, has "parfaitement saisi le caractère" (p. 7) of his subject, even if he has lent Chicot a somewhat sharper wit ("esprit" [p. 7]) than he actually possessed, even while cleaning up his language, which was rife with scatological and sexual allusions. The latter point is not incidental, pointing as it does

to a self-imposed limitation on the historian's part and a regrettable obscuring of source material: from the point of view of Mathorez, which reflects that of a self-consciously high civilisation about to shatter on the rocks of the First World War, it is unthinkable actually to print the vulgar texts by and about Chicot (he merely identifies them), and it has not since occurred to anyone else to do so. As for the extent and quality of Chicot's wit, if we leave Dumas aside (as we must) and rely on contemporary testimony (including the testimony of imitation), it seems indeed to have been of the rough-and-ready sort, apt to slide readily into personal insult and practical jokes. (His nickname, which he acquired very early in life, is related to the verb *chicoter*—to behave in a quarrelsome manner.)

This propensity, however, seems usually to have been enlisted in the cause of royal authority. There is support in the documents for Mathorez's portrait of a hard-edged but profound intimacy between Chicot and his master (who finally issued him a patent of nobility) of a kind that overlaps considerably, *mutatis mutandis*, with Shakespeare's royal-foolish pair:

... il combattit avec la langue; il tourna en ridicule les ennemis du roi, voire même ses amis; il leur donna des surnoms qui amusaient Henri III, il lui disait les nouvelles scandaleuses de la cour et de la province. ... Il possédait toute une philosophie morale résumée en quelques aphorismes. ... le gascon distraiyait le roi et causait avec lui sur un pied d'intimité tel qu'entre deux facéties il lui pouvait glisser un conseil et un avis qui auraient été mal venus de la part d'une autre personne. Chicot était aussi dévoué à son fils Henriquet qu'Henri III lui était attaché. (Mathorez, pp. 21-22)

The overlap extends to the fool's universal licence—"Comme amuseur du roi, le gascon jouissait à la Cour d'une absolue liberté de langage" (Mathorez, p. 27)—including the freedom to critique the sexual mores of its denizens; the overlap extends also to familiarity of speech (Chicot regularly addresses Henri as "tu", in keeping with the Fool's pronoun usage) and the sort of familial nick-naming that runs through *King Lear*—not only the Fool's "nuncle" but the king's "boy", which otherwise would scarcely have suited the mature Robert Armin.

It should be stipulated straightaway that Chicot is far removed, in other respects, from Shakespeare's, or the standard, image of the professional jester, even more so than Archie Armstrong when the latter dabbled in diplomacy. That is part of my point: the function seems to have been compatible with a greater range of activities than we habitually recognise. Chicot was also, most notably, a soldier ("capitaine"), whom his royal masters entrusted with missions requiring reliability, initiative and valour. He may also have been an assassin at royal com-

mand: d'Aubigné has him surprising and killing the Count of La Rochefoucaud during the St Bartholomew's massacre, although Mathorez considers the case not proven.<sup>2</sup>

One of the more sustained texts concerning him—a pamphlet all of eleven pages long entitled (in brief) *Les inhvmanitez et sacrileges dv Capitaine Lignou envers les Religieux de la Chartreuse du Liqet ... avec l'emprisonnement de Chicot par ledict Lignou*—recounts his mission to negotiate with a local warlord (“Capitaine Lignou”) in the Touraine. Rather as Kent winds up in the stocks thanks to Regan and Cornwall—and this is not the only episode in Chicot's career that suggests a kind of amalgam of Lear's Fool with the blunt and diligent Caius—the king's messenger found himself imprisoned. It is Chicot's discomfiture that attracts the anonymous writer with the explicit aim of amusing his correspondent (“Tout cecy n'est digne de vous amuser dauantage, & laisseray là Chicot entre les mains du-dict Lignou ...” [*Les inhvmanitez*, p. 10]):

... [Chicot] ny pour apprehension d'estre captif, renaque, bouffe, deteste, grince les dents, & crie: car *simia semper simia*, renouuelant toutes les folies dont il resjouissoit son Maistre, qui ne meritent de parvenir jusques à voz pures oreilles: Toutefois, on dict qui donne sondict Maistre Henry à tous les Diables, & le maudict souuentesfois, & a essayé de sortir par vne infinité de ruses & stratagesmes qu'il inuentoit en soy-même. (p. 8)

In a proto-Shakespearean mingling of kings and clowns, a virtual jest book (Chicot produced none himself) thereby emerges to take possession of a pamphlet whose tragic purport is given portentous priority in its title (“*inhumanitez et sacrileges*”).

Also extant, both as separate publications and as transcribed by L'Estoile, are letters written during Chicot's temporary disgrace and banishment from court during the Estates General at Blois in the autumn of 1588. The reason for this is not spelled out; he claims not to know himself:

... m'ayant commandé de me retirer pour trois jours ou pour trois mois, je ne sçai pas bien lequel des deux, car je demourai si estonné que je ne peus bien entendre ton jargon. (cited in L'Estoile, III: 212)

At any rate, Chicot was evidently back in time to help the king give the Guises their fatal early Christmas present. That may have been part of the issue. Chicot

2 See Mathorez, pp. 15-16.



was noted for detesting the Guises, their League and their clan (he had been beaten and whipped by the brother of Henri de Guise, the duc de Mayenne, against whom he regularly threatened vengeance). Such a loose cannon might have proved a liability while Henri was playing along with the League and preparing his *coup*. Chicot was (it must be said) no fool—for that matter, he tells Henri that his place can readily be supplied from among the delegates at Blois—and he hints broadly when he enjoins him, “fay bonne mine à l’accustomé, pour mieux vendre la marchandise, et que chacun se face fouetter à sa guise” (cited in L’Estoile, III: 214, my emphasis). An accompanying letter asks the Queen for her intervention and facetiously urges her to enlist in his cause “ce grand vice-roy Guisard . . . puisqu’il gouverne tout” (cited in L’Estoile, III: 216).

“Tout” is not said casually. At this point in France, the stakes for the monarch, the monarchy and the unity of the country were every bit as high as those evoked in *King Lear*, where the head of state foolishly gives two of his daughters “all” (II.ii.439), omitting the one whom a wiser king renders “queen of us, of ours and our fair France” (I.i.259). In the unfair France of Henri III, the tension had been building for years, as the League grew in influence, and in late 1585 L’Estoile was transcribing numerous politically charged texts in circulation, several of which place Chicot on the political stage. I use the metaphor advisedly. One of the pieces (labelled as published in Paris in May 1585) actually describes a mock-trial played out in *commedia dell’arte* style in the “Court Matagonesque des Archifols”, in which fools stand in for the principal competitors, Chicot taking the part of Henri de Navarre (as indeed both Henri III and Chicot, in due course, would take his part indeed).<sup>3</sup> Fools standing in for kings are not a novelty, of course, much less a Shakespearean one, but it is an idea that *King Lear* strikingly enacts in the context of a royal power vacuum and imminent political implosion:

That Lord that counselled thee to give away thy land,  
Come place him here by me; do thou for him stand.  
The sweet and bitter fool will presently appear,  
The one in motley here, the other found out there. (I.iv.137-40)

The other writings preserved by L’Estoile are *pasquils* (or *pasquins*)—anonymous political epigrams which, I have argued elsewhere (“French Accents”), participate in creating a species of multivocal political drama. They include one text

3 See L’Estoile, II: 236-41.

which rings changes, line by line, on the word “tout” across a series of social and political affirmations reminiscent of the Merlinesque prophecies:

Les grands seigneurs demandent tout,  
Le Roy leur accorde tout.  
.....  
La Ligue veult faire tout,  
Le médecin guairist de tout,  
Le Guizard s’oppose à tout. (cited in L’Estoile, II: 316)

This satirical evocation of carnivalesque abundance, with Guise cast as a *trouble-fête*, is counterbalanced by a poem that systematically echoes and undoes it, bringing fantasy down to earth by the thudding repetition of “rien”; Guise is now in his malcontent element:

Les grands seigneurs ne sont plus rien  
Le Roy aussi n’entend à rien,  
.....  
La Ligue ne nous fera rien,  
Le médecin ne guairist de rien,  
Le Guizard se trouble de rien. (cited in L’Estoile, II: 316-17)

And from one vision to the next, Chicot is changed from a sweet to a bitter fool: “Chicot tout seul se rid de tout”; “Chicot ne peult rire de rien” (cited in L’Estoile, II: 316, 317). It is surely to the discursive point here that one of several bitter anagrams in circulation on the name of the French king, the absence at the political centre, figured him as “H. Rien”. Lear, of course, is similarly deciphered, or enciphered: “Now thou art an O without a figure. . . . I am a fool, thou art nothing” (I.iv.183-85).

In this context, it is irresistible, intertextually speaking, to conclude with an account of the concluding *pasquil* in the series, even though it does not mention Chicot, who, one might say, disappears silently into the bleak political landscape, as does Lear’s Fool, but equally so as to become a present absence. The third poem is a self-styled Sonnet “Sur le tout et le rien de ce temps” (cited in L’Estoile, II: 317), and it applies the cosmic perspective, imploring divine aid for the king. It does so in terms of the same mystery of creation *ex nihilo* that is blindly denied by Lear in rejecting Cordelia (“Nothing will come of nothing” [I.i.90]) and that human monarchs are figured as undoing:

Du Rien, tout ce grand Tout, ce nous dit l'Escriture,  
Notre grand Dieu parfait, et toutefois nos Rois,  
Effgies de Dieu, supportés de ses loix,  
Réduisent Tout à Rien, contre toute nature.

Lear likewise, notoriously, gets Nature wrong into the bargain.

For the satirist, the Guises figure as what seem prototypes of Goneril, Regan and Edmund, rushing into the power vacuum, attempting, as Andrew Marvell would put it, to “ruine the great Work of Time” (“*An Horatian Ode upon Cromwel’s Return from Ireland*”, l. 34) by setting up a veritable anti-Nature as a goddess of their own, though in the name of a return to primal order (for the Guises claimed descent from Charlemagne):

Ce Rien, représenté par la vaine imposture  
De nos ligués Guisards, s’escrie à haute voix  
De ce qu’on le refait ce qu’il fut autre fois,  
Et que ce nom de Tout en France ne lui dure.

Of course, such a false divinity has no power to make anything, much less everything, out of nothing:

Accordez donc ceci: le Roy, de Tout, fait Rien;  
Or de ce Rien restant, Guise ne fera Rien,  
Ne représentant point la divine puissance.

The wheel must come full circle, we are told, with the support of royalists of good will:

Mais, qui de Tout fait Rien peult de Rien faire Tout,  
Et pourtant nous suivrons le Roy jusque au bout,  
Assurés que, de Rien, il peult Tout faire en France.

As it happened, Henri III played into the League’s hands, and attracted Jacques Clément’s arm, by trying to beat them at their deadly Machiavellian game. Divine succour was conspicuous by its absence—or, rather, decided to back a more promising horse, no doubt providentially foreseeing his conversion.

Ironically, the failed attempt at succour offered by Cordelia, who lets herself be drawn from the side of France’s fairy-tale king into the killing fields that Britain has become, tends to confirm that Lear’s tragedy depends on getting distracted en route to Dover and thereby missing the boat. In this admittedly

restricted view, that tragedy's essence lies, not in the horrible "image" of the "promised end" (V.iii.262, 261), but in Lear's earlier attempt to get his bearings without his best-informed interlocutor:

*Lear.* Am I in France?

*Kent.* In your own kingdom, sir.

*Lear.* Do not abuse me. (IV.vii.76-77)

Lear is right to intuit here that Kent makes a poor and partial substitute for the vanished Fool, and that in attempting to disabuse his master by offering the sweetness of *Tout*, he is occluding the bitterness of *Rien*. Like the Fool's closest stand-in, Cordelia, with her "no cause, no cause" (IV.vii.75), even Kent finally responds to Lear's overwhelming "nothing" by telling him that he is "everything" (IV.vi.104) after all. Neither Lear's true fool nor Chicot would so have allowed the profession of "corrupter of words" to corrupt their identity as "men o' their words" (IV.vi.103).

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